

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE F-25

WASHINGTON POST
23 March 1985

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Group Aids Miskitos the U.N. Bypasses

Twice in recent months I have reported on the "privatization" of the anti-Sandinista war in Nicaragua since Congress cut off the CIA's funding of the "contra" forces.

My reporter on the scene, Jon Lee Anderson, witnessed the flow of private money and supplies to rebels and families, including from the Unification Church and Soldier of Fortune magazine.

Another group we mentioned was Friends of the Americas, formed last year by a Louisiana state legislator, Louis (Woody) Jenkins, and his wife, Diane, a lawyer and former state official. Friends of the Americas concentrates on helping Miskito Indians who have fled Sandinista persecution and taken refuge across the border in Honduras. Most of the Indians are in U.N. refugee camps.

But the United Nations, apparently hoping to maintain a nonpolitical image, will not assist refugees who are within 40 kilometers of the Nicaraguan border. There are thousands of Miskitos living in the jungles within the 40-km zone, and it is these refugees that FOA is helping.

My reporter watched armed Indian contras help deliver one FOA supply shipment to the refugees. And Indian guerrilla leader Steadman Fagoth told him that food and medicine deliveries to civilian Miskitos enabled his soldiers to "concentrate on the war" against the Managua regime.

But Diane Jenkins wrote me an impassioned letter, and from conversations with the Jenkinses since then, I've concluded that our reports, while accurate, did not do full justice to two honest, well-intentioned people whose motives in aiding the refugees are humanitarian, not political.

"We have the same policy as World Relief, [a private agency] which operates the U.N. camp," Diane Jenkins said. "We help all civilian refugees, regardless of whom they are related to. Also like World Relief, our only concern is that they themselves are civilians, not combatants."

The reason the FOA supplies were being delivered in rebel jeeps, she said, is that this was the only means available in the remote jungle. "We never set foot in the military camps," she said.

FOA's goal is worthwhile beyond any question. It is to provide food, medicine, seeds, tools and schooling for the Indian refugees. "Nearly 70 percent of the Miskitos are children," she said, "and they are suffering from malnutrition, anemia, severe parasites and malaria. Friends of the Americas is the only private organization providing any significant assistance in the border region."

She added: "Friends of the Americas' attitude is that we don't care where the refugees are. If they are in need and we are permitted to help, we will. We are even willing to work in Nicaragua if the Sandinista government will allow us to aid the refugees there without political interference."

From donors in the 50 states and Canada, the Jenkinses have collected about 20,000 "Shoebboxes for Liberty," each containing a pound of beans, soap, toothpaste, a toothbrush, socks, underwear, a pocket knife, eating utensils, fishhooks and line, vitamins, vegetable seeds and other small items.

Anyone who would like more information about Friends of the Americas can reach them at 912 North Foster Dr., Baton Rouge, La. 70806.